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PP RUEHLMC
DE RUEHYE #0127 0460340
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 150340Z FEB 08
FM AMEMBASSY YEREVAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7020
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 1462
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 0546
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORPORATION WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L YEREVAN 000127

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM AM

SUBJECT: THE DVD WAR: THE RULING PARTY STRIKES BACK,
NASTIER

Classified By: CDA Joseph Pennington, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Levon Ter-Petrossian's (LTP) campaign has for weeks been distributing campaign DVDs, featuring the former president's campaign speeches and rallies. This technique has been somewhat effective, not only as a medium to reach voters in the absence of fair television coverage, but also as an additional means of dramatizing and accentuating that lack of fair television access. The LTP campaign claims to have distributed tens of thousands of the DVDs all across Armenia, and it seems that these DVDs have indeed penetrated far and wide. By 2008, even most rural villages have at least a few households that own DVD players, so the potential audience is large. This new technique harks back to the late-Soviet dissident tradition of "samizdat": clandestinely published manuscripts that were passed hand to hand among Soviets thirsty for independent political information and commentary.

¶2. (C) PM Serzh Sargsian's campaign -- or if not directly the campaign itself, perhaps an ally -- has now started reproducing and distributing their own DVDs. However, while LTP's DVDs show the candidate's speeches, the ruling party DVD is nothing but vicious anti-LTP propaganda. The prime minister and his campaign are not mentioned at all. The DVD contains three short "documentaries" that together comprise a patchwork quilt of conspiracy theories and what passes locally for deadly insult. For example, the former president is accused of being the bastard child of a Turkish man, with whom his mother had a secret adulterous relationship. The movie is deeply imbued with anti-Semitism, making much of the fact that LTP's wife is Jewish (true), while falsely alleging that LTP is in the pay of the Israeli intelligence service, in a conspiracy with Israel, Turkey, the Masons, British Petroleum company, and the British Embassy in Armenia to betray Armenia's interests, all with an alleged goal of weakening Armenia to the point it can be invaded and annexed by Azerbaijan.

¶3. (C) A relative of an Embassy employee works at the pro-governmental television station where the DVDs were created and are being duplicated on a large scale. LTP campaign sources allege that the DVD is being distributed especially by student/youth movements associated with the Republican Party.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: This ham-handed move seems to smack of desperation and speaks to the increasing nervousness that ruling circles seem to have about the former president's campaign. We judge this new DVD will actually harm Sargsian's campaign overall, because it is so outrageously over-the-top in its allegations that many people will see it as a transparent smear campaign. Anecdotally, several of our own staff that had previously clung to this dislike of LTP

based on his past record, upon seeing this DVD declared in disgust, "That's it, I'm going to vote for LTP now! This is too disgusting." Armenians have a culture that appreciates and identifies with underdogs, and it looks as though the ruling party campaign has once again managed to come across as the heavy-handed bully.

PENNINGTON